

David Letterman is best known for “Top Ten” lists, but others can play that game, too. In fact, this morning *I’d* like to start off with a list of “*The Top Ten Things You’ll Probably Never Hear In Church.*”

10. Hey! It’s MY turn to sit in the front pew!
9. I just love hearing feedback from the microphones!
8. Budget meetings are such fun!
7. Church would be perfect if we just had longer sermons!
6. Please don’t make me park close in. The long walk is good exercise.
5. I enjoy evangelism much more than golf.
4. Hey, let’s stand up during the whole service!
3. Pastor should preach more about money!
2. I just love singing hymns I’ve never heard before!
1. Since we’re all here, let’s start the service early.

It’s easy to laugh at these “trials and tribulations of church life.” We expect them. We endure them. We take them in stride. That’s just how church life is. It’s a little different, though, when it comes to trials and tribulations of the Christian life as a whole. With them, we’re not nearly so philosophical. Oh, some people are. I suspect we all know Christians who seem to handle whatever comes with good grace. And I do mean whatever comes! Far from thinking they should be exempt from life’s trials, they seem to expect them. Far from complaining about life’s tribulations, they patiently endure them. And far from resenting God for life’s hardships, they take them in stride, as if to say, “*That’s just how the Christian life is.*”

Yes, I suspect we all know people like that, Christians who handle whatever comes with good grace. But why do you suppose they are that way? Why do you suppose they have such a different attitude towards trials and tribulations? Such a different perspective on following Jesus? I can’t answer for all of them, of course, but I think I know why many operate that way. It’s because they know better than to go on common assumptions about the Christian life. They’ve really dug into the Gospel and have read the fine print!

Now, that probably sounds a bit cryptic, so let me explain what I mean. If you ask the average Christian, “*What is the Gospel?*” they’ll probably quote something like John 3:16. “**For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but may have eternal life.**” So would that be a good answer? Would it be theologically correct? Yes...for starters. If you want to be sure you’ll go to heaven when you die, put your faith in Jesus Christ, for He is the only Savior. That is the Gospel truth, and John 3:16 makes it clear.

But now, even though that answer would be correct, let me ask: Would the answer be complete? Would it be the whole message of the Gospel? And to

that we'd have to say no. For instance, John 3:16 doesn't directly mention Jesus' sacrifice on cross, so we would certainly want to add a verse to clarify that, just to make sure people know how their sins are forgiven. Perhaps Ephesians 1:7, "**In Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...**" Then, too, John 3:16 doesn't mention Jesus' resurrection, so we would want to add a verse about that, just to make sure people know how they're guaranteed eternal life. Perhaps we'd pick the verse where Jesus says, "**Because I live, you will live also.**" And even though John 3:16 does a great job teaching salvation by faith alone, it doesn't explain what it means to have faith in Jesus – that is, what it's like to trust in Him, what you can expect when you follow Him, what faith does to your values and your perspective on life. So we'd want to add some verses that clarify that, too, wouldn't we?

And you see where I'm going with this. John 3:16 is a great way to begin explaining the Gospel, but there is more to it than just one verse; more to the Gospel than just how to be sure we'll go heaven when we die. In fact, the Gospel is mainly about what happens before we die. It's mainly about following Jesus here and now – trusting, serving, obeying Jesus here and now as we journey toward heaven. And you know what? The Gospel says some very interesting things about this journey – like what we should and should not expect along the way; what we'll probably have to endure and take in stride. It offers promises to strengthen us, warnings to protect us, directions to guide our steps. It says some very interesting things about the journey – and some very helpful things for those who are willing to dig in and take the whole Gospel seriously! Willing to dig in and read the fine print.

Now, human nature being what it is, we won't automatically want to do this. It's just so much easier to glom onto nice bits and pieces of the Gospel and call it good. *God loves me! God accepts me the way I am! God forgives all my sins! I have eternal life as gift. What more do I need to know?*

Yes, what more do I need to know? Well, maybe this. That God saved me from sin for a reason God saved me from sin for a new kind of life. Not just to stay the way I am. Not just to continue in sin. Not just to go on catering to me-myself-and-I. God saved me – saved each one of us – for a new kind of life.

In fact, what God has in mind for us – well before we get to heaven! – is a dramatic "make-over." Whatever we may be starting out, God wants to transform us into someone truly amazing. Little by little, God wants to smooth away our rough edges. Step by step, God wants to shape us according to his will. Day by day, God wants to mold us into the very best people possible – in fact, make us more and more like Jesus Himself! That is what God has in mind!

And that, my friends, is the whole Gospel. Yes, God accepts us as we are – but He has no intention of leaving us that way! Yes, God forgives us our sins – so that we'll have the chance to move beyond them! Yes, God loves us with an

infinite love – and for that very reason He will do what is really best for us, not just what we think is best. Remember, God is not the divine equivalent of some “Disneyland Dad.” For Him, love doesn’t mean coddling us, indulging us, much less rearranging the universe to suit us. No, God is a true Father – and a wise One, who genuinely cares what kind of people we turn out to be. In fact, God is the ultimate Father, committed to our ultimate well-being. And that is what lies behind the grace and love and forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel – our ultimate well-being. It’s all part of God’s ultimate plan to make us over and to make us better; to make us more and more like Jesus Himself!

Yes, that is the whole Gospel. And it’s all in the Bible, of course. But to really get it, to really get God’s plan for our spiritual growth, we need to dig into the Bible and read the fine print. That is, we need to mull over all of Jesus’ words, prayerfully connect the dots, and then apply what we learn to our lives.

For an example, let’s just take one of the verses from today’s Gospel: **“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”** That is a tough one, isn’t it? Probably not a verse you’re likely to hear in one of those Foo-Foo-Feel-Good churches. Yet, if you really dig into it, really mull over Jesus’ words... Well, let’s do that.

First, He talks about **“those who love their life...”** This would be the kind of person who says, *“I’m just fine with the way I am. I see no need to change or improve. Actually, other people should change to suit me. And if there is a God, He should improve things to suit me. Sure, there might be a few minor ways I could live a better life. But why bother? Life is too short! Gotta grab all the gusto you can get! I’m just fine with the way I am.”* We all know people who think like that, don’t we? People whose life revolves around me-myself-and-I. Sad to say, some even call themselves Christian. They **“love their life”** just the way it is. And that’s a losing proposition! This life is too short...to waste on self-indulgence! This life is too short...to live for ourselves and ignore what’s coming next! So small wonder Jesus says, **“Those who love their life lose it...”**

Then Jesus says the smart ones are **“those who hate their life in this world...”** He doesn’t mean **“hate”** in the petty sense: *“I hate my life!”* No, He’s talking about folks who realize that this life isn’t an end itself but a journey toward that life which is life indeed! So they know life isn’t about having things our way – a fact our selfish nature hates! They know life isn’t about indulging our appetites, grabbing all the gusto we can get – which our selfish nature also hates! They know this life is really preparation for what lies ahead, and that preparation takes hard work! It means ignoring the inner egotist, that wants what it wants when it wants it. It means tuning in to what God wants instead. It means denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus – all of which our selfish nature hates. But Jesus says the smart folks do it anyway, because they know what matters most is not the journey but what’s waiting at their destination. They know **“those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”**

As I said, this is not a message you're likely to hear in one of those Foo-Foo-Feel-Good churches. In fact, it runs contrary to the thinking in some Lutheran circles today – that to fill the pews we need to water down doctrine and moral values so everyone will feel comfortable, we need make worship entertaining and preach what people want hear, so that when they go home they'll...well, feel good. And maybe that will fill the pews. I don't know. But what I do know is that Jesus didn't say, "Go fill the pews..." Nor did He say, "Go make people feel good..." He said, "**Go make disciples...**" And how does a disciple live? We seek God's will, not our own. We obey God's "Top Ten List," not the world's. We deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, trusting Him to carry out His divine "make-over plan" and to fulfill His promise, "**Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life!**" That's the whole Gospel. It's right there in the Bible. And what a difference it makes for those who dig in and read the fine print!

You know, I cannot think of a single great Christian who coasted easily through life. But I can sure think of Christians who read the fine print and, in spite of their hardships, became amazing human beings. One such person was Annie Johnson Flint. Early in life, she suffered many losses and hardships, then became horribly crippled as a young adult. So did she use that as an excuse to wallow in self-pity? Did she rail against God because life was hard? No. Fortunately, she had not been taught the Foo-Foo-Feel-Good Gospel. She knew better than to expect a smooth ride through life. She intended to follow Jesus come what may! And she did! Trusting that He was able to do abundantly far more than all she could ask or imagine, Annie Johnson Flint devoted herself to making a difference the only way she knew how: by encouraging fellow Christians through poetry. One of her poems goes like this:

<i>God has not promised skies always blue, Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through; God has not promised sun without rain, Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.</i>	<i>But God has promised strength for the day, Rest for the labor, light for the way, Grace for the trials, help from above, Unfailing sympathy, undying love.</i>
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For Annie Johnson Flint, life was too short to waste focusing on herself or feeling sorry for herself. Instead, she focused on following Christ until she entered that life which is life indeed. Now she stands in heaven and has all eternity to savor the joys her Lord prepared for her – joys infinitely greater than any she missed here on earth – not the least of which is the joy of hearing God's praise forever: "**Well done, good and faithful servant!**"

For us, too, life is too short to waste focusing on ourselves or feeling sorry for ourselves. God has saved us from all that for something better -- a dramatic "make-over" into truly amazing people; in fact, people who are becoming more and more like Jesus Himself. That's God's plan for us. That's the whole Gospel. It's all right there in the Bible. And what a difference this good news can make in our lives if we're willing to dig in and read the fine print! Amen.